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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000510

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FROM ANTI-AMERICAN WARRIORS TO PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS: THE
DEMOCRACY WRITERS OF DALAT

REF: HCMC 282

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Fairfax, Consul General, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The "Democracy Writers" of Dalat, a small group of former Viet Cong fighters and war time propaganda writers who have become outspoken pro-democracy advocates, state that conditions for political dissidents in Vietnam have improved somewhat over the past few years but remain far from ideal. While their long-term goal is full democracy for Vietnam, the group's immediate objectives revolve around securing more space for the development of civil society through respect for freedom of speech and freedom of expression. While the group's members are no longer either in jail or under house arrest, they are under constant monitoring by (nominally) undercover police. While they cannot publish their writings openly in printed form, they can and do publish on web sites and blogs with no adverse repercussions. Despite their frustration with on-going restrictions and their inability to establish an independent writers' association, the group is upbeat about Vietnam's long term prospects, assuring the CG that "many senior Communist Party members, government officials and national assembly members remain in touch with them and support their struggle for freedom of speech. At an official level, the GVN is clearly not happy with the group, as demonstrated by the dressing-down that provincial officials gave the CG for meeting with the group. END SUMMARY.

Former Fighters With a New Mission

12. (C) On Friday, May 12, the CG visited the "Democracy Writers" of Dalat in Lam Dong province: Bui Minh Quoc, Mai Tahn Linh and Bao Cu. All three are CPV members with stellar credentials as Viet Cong fighters. Quoc, in particular, was a highly decorated soldier, senior military officer, and a leading member of the communist party with close ties to a number of war-era leaders. Beginning in the 1980's, however, all three fell afoul of their CPV colleagues by openly urging the GVN to relax restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly and to allow the formation of a genuinely independent union of writers and artists. In explaining their transformation from CPV stalwarts to dissidents to the CG, the three emphasized that as writers and war correspondents they understood why all media as well as the arts were controlled during the war in order to build national resistance. Several years after the war ended, however, they grew increasingly frustrated with continuing controls over not just political writings but all forms of expression and thus began to pressure their party and government to adopt democratic reforms. Linh's and Cu's activism landed them in jail on various occasions for terms ranging from several months to two

years. Even though Quoc is recognized as the group's leader, he avoided jail time and instead faced only house arrest. This "special treatment" most likely reflected his past contributions as well as his close personal contacts with various CPV leaders.

13. (C) Quoc and his colleagues went to great pains to point out that they do not oppose the GVN or the CPV. Instead, they are advocating that the GVN and CPV move toward a more open, democratic form of government, citing their former enemy -- the United States -- as the prime example of where they believe Vietnam should be heading. Their immediate goals are more modest and include founding a truly independent association of writers and artists to advocate both on behalf of its members' rights and on behalf of overall freedom of speech and expression in all areas -- cultural and social as well as political. Quoc, a well-respected poet, points out that Vietnam not only limits political speech but also controls all forms of individual expression. The three are clearly widely read and their views on the optimum development path for Vietnam include a gradual civil society through the development of intermediary organizations so as to develop an awareness of rights and responsibilities among the population as the country slowly moves toward full democracy.

Conditions Better, but Not Good Enough

14. (C) When asked to compare conditions today to those of several years ago, all three responded that conditions have improved, citing the fact that none of the three are currently in jail as proof of the improvement. As recently as just three years ago, at least one of their members was always either being prosecuted, in jail or under house arrest. These days, they routinely post their views on the Internet, either on their blogs or on friends' and colleagues' sites. Despite continuing to write articles that they describe as at least as controversial as anything they wrote in the past, the authorities generally leave them alone. While they welcome all

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of these changes, they also point out that they are constantly followed; police frequently interviews people they speak with; and they cannot publish their works in printed form in Vietnam. To have a real impact on thinking in Vietnam, they argue, they must be allowed to publish their works in newspapers, magazines and books.

15. (C) Quoc said that they are far from alone in their views or in their predicament. He stated that even Vietnam's most famous living war hero, General Vo Nguyen Giap, had to search for months to find a publication willing to print an open letter from him. When a small, Hanoi-based publication finally carried the letter last fall, the publication's editor was sacked. Similarly, Quoc said that former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet's recent "open letter" on the need for the GVN to pay more attention to the plight of the poor was severely edited prior to publication. When asked how they stay up to date on issues such as these, Quoc and the others immediately responded that offshore e-mail accounts work wonderfully in Vietnam and that they are in constant contact with "many, many" senior CPV members -- not only retirees such as Giap and Kiet but also many active members. Quoc and his colleagues ended on an up-beat note, assuring the CG that they are far from alone and that many active CPV members, GVN officials and National Assembly members agree with them but are either biding their time or trying to advance a similar agenda in a less public, more gradual manner.

Bad, Bad CG

16. (SBU) Prior to the CG's meeting with the Democracy Writers, the Deputy Chairman of the Lam Dong Provincial People's Committee (CP) gave CG a public (filmed for TV and in front of the Canadian and New Zealand CGs) dressing down for choosing to meet "only with people who criticize the government." The fact that the Democracy Writers were the only controversial stop on an otherwise "feel good" agenda of visits to government-approved groups focusing on cultural preservation and agricultural

achievements did not blunt the criticism. In keeping with usual GVN policy, the Deputy Chairman did not attempt to block the meeting but did urge the CG to "voluntarily" reconsider his agenda. (Comment: We are not sure if this aired on local Dalat TV or not. Complaints of that nature are common. End Comment.)

After the meeting with the PC, the Canadian CG expressed his outrage over the Deputy Chairman's remarks, focusing particularly on the way he contrasted the U.S. CG's "bad" behavior with the "good" behavior of the Canadian CG, who only planned to meet with university representatives. The Canadian considered canceling his own agenda to join his American counterpart at the meeting with the Democracy Writers, but we both agreed doing so would not have been helpful.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The story of the Democracy Writers of Dalat reflects both the progress the GVN has made in expanding the space for peaceful dissent and how far it still has to go. Despite the onerous restrictions under which the writers operate, they are operating and pushing forward. Their upbeat description of the level of support among CPV members in the GVN as well as the National Assembly closely paralleled the comments that former HCMC People's Committee Chair Vo Viet Thanh made to the Ambassador and CG a few months ago (reftel).
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